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John J. Petillo
Sacred Heart University

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Respecting Differences Is A Non-negotiable, Moral Imperative

John Petillo, President of Sacred Heart University

HuffPost College, The Blog, March 10, 2016

Fear and ignorance are blissful companions when it comes to intolerance. It assumes innumerable forms. Sometimes it is blatant and obvious. But oftentimes its posture is ambiguous, disingenuous or lacking overt hostility. It also may masquerade in passive-aggressive costumes, theater that is obscured through politics, competition, humor or youthful malfeasance.

Intolerance is no stranger, but oftentimes we choose to ignore it, wait for someone else to say or do something, conspire quietly or embrace its power by endorsing it loudly and boldly. It is vital that we recognize the difference between these reactions and are able to separate the human need to be accepted, ideological blindness or frustration from hate, sociopathic behavior and overt bigotry.

Intolerance abounds. Every day, it seems, brings another round of racial, sexual, gender, ethnic or religiously motivated violence, humor, marginalization or exclusion. Even on college campuses, we've seen hateful words spoken and written, heard awful songs sung on buses, witnessed hazing, inappropriately themed gatherings and countless examples of misguided bad taste.

This negativity is amplified--or seemingly justified--by rude and malicious talk from some politicians who pander to peoples' basest fears, fanning fires aggravated by ignorance, poverty, anger and hopelessness. Our fears of terrorism, instability and economic decline are palatable and good fodder. Charlatans bend that hatred, despair and frustration into hostility and rage. And into votes.

We know, as parents and leaders, that understanding and justification are often shaped by individual heritages, notably our upbringing and our environments. As a result, we can neither claim all of our achievements as our own, nor take all the blame for our failures. Beyond upbringing and culture, our youth are assailed by personal interactions,

peer pressure and unfettered access to broadcast and social media that share news, opinions, actions and reactions in nanoseconds. Life happens too quickly to be filtered, processed or discussed in the moment.

That's why schools, colleges and universities play such critical roles--in partnership with parents, clergy and other leaders--in helping our students understand right from wrong, and the consequences, intended or otherwise, that accompany every action. It becomes one of our many responsibilities to hold up biases and intolerant acts and examine them under a microscope. We must disassemble their many parts and discuss narrow-minded behaviors in context to society and circumstances, and relative to respect for one another's differences, beliefs and backgrounds.

Pope Francis has declared 2016 a Holy Year of Mercy. While his attention has been largely focused on poverty and forgiveness, it is clear that tolerance must take center stage to even begin to achieve real, sustainable change. Tolerance must be deeply rooted in respect for the other; otherwise it is merely superficial. Political correctness can be simply tolerance with shallow sincerity. Francis has shown us the difference between gestures and substance. Sincere gestures are the outward manifestations of core beliefs.

Respecting differences is a critical element of everything that happens at colleges and universities. The dignity and value of every human being is paramount, and the hope is that graduates go into the world enriched with the tools and resolve to help make it a better place for everyone they encounter. As educators, we are responsible for guiding and helping to mold youthful exuberance, passion and naiveté. It is not our role to shelter our children from prejudice, fanaticism, xenophobia, chauvinism and many other forms of bias and bigotry. ***That*** would be impossible. Instead, we must arm them with perspective, common sense, a strong voice, an open mind ***and the courage to demonstrate those convictions.***